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ABSTRACT

The goal of emancipatory learning is to free learners from the forces that limit their options and control their lives and to move them to act for social and political change. Although emancipatory learning is commonly associated with adulthood, not all adult education fosters it, and not all adult educators align themselves with perspectives that lead to emancipatory learning. Fostering emancipatory learning may bring adult educators in conflict with some prevailing beliefs about adult education, including the educational philosophy of andragogy. Among the theories from which adult educators draw to develop pedagogical practices that foster emancipatory learning are critical theory, feminist pedagogy, and poststructuralist theories. Critical examinations of practices underlying emancipatory learning have revealed that they do not always have the desired effect and that relationships between and among adult educators and students are not straightforward. The term "empowerment" is another issue related to emancipatory learning. Although empowerment can occur as part of emancipatory learning, it does so within the context of social and political transformation. Because of emancipatory learning's emphasis on social change, some have proposed that it is a collective activity. However, evidence exists that individuals can and do engage in emancipatory learning. (Contains 16 references.) (MN)

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Adult, Career, and Vocational Education

by Susan Imel

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How Emancipatory Is Adult Learning?

One type of adult learning is emancipatory or liberatory in nature. The goal of emancipatory learning is to free learners from the forces that limit their options and control over their lives and to move them to take action to bring about social and political change (Cranton 1994; Inglis 1997). According to Mezirow (1981), emancipatory learning, with its emphasis on learner transformation, can take place only in adulthood because, "it is only in late adolescence and in adulthood that a person can recognize being caught in his/her own history and reliving it" (p. 11).

The work of Paulo Freire has informed much of the writing related to emancipatory education (Merriam and Caffarella 1999), but it is also influenced by the German philosopher Habermas, Mezirow's work on transformative learning, feminism, and critical theory. This **Myths and Realities** investigates to what extent adult education actually fulfills an emancipatory mission by examining beliefs and practices surrounding emancipatory learning.

Should Adult Education Foster Emancipatory Learning?

Although emancipatory learning is commonly associated with adulthood, not all adult education fosters it. Individuals who practice adult education hold a number of varying philosophical beliefs about the goals and purposes of education, and not all adult educators align themselves with perspectives that lead to emancipatory learning. An often debated question among those in the field is "What is an appropriate role for adult education?" Should adult educators work in socially responsible and relevant ways "to actively promote continuous societal change by promoting the ideals of participatory democracy defined as full citizen participation, freedom, equality and social justice" (Cunningham 1996, p. 1) or should they support existing social, economic, and political systems (Baptiste 1998; Barr 1999; Foley 1998).

Some (e.g., Barr 1999; Foley 1998) suggest that adult education has increasingly become instrumentalist in nature, designed to serve the "profit system" (Foley 1998, p. 139). Barr (1999) attributes this situation to adult education's move toward professionalization and establishment as a field in which "students are viewed as consumers and adult education as a commodity" (p. 71). Baptiste (1998) believes that all adult educators are "caring" individuals and they express their caring in one of the three following ways: as caring for human capital formation in which the concern is improving the marketability of individuals, as caring for self-improvement that seeks to change individuals in some manner, or as caring for empowering their allies. Only the latter with its emphasis on taking action against some oppression would foster emancipatory learning.

Fostering emancipatory learning may bring adult educators in conflict with some of the prevailing beliefs about adult education. For example, the educational philosophy of andragogy–with its major assumption that learner life experiences play a major role in the learning process–places constraints on "developing critical consciousness in students" because students' "everyday living is likely to be characterized by a naive pre-reflective adherence to 'established' versions of the life world" (Harden 1996, p. 32). When learner experience is placed at the center of educational practice, it becomes privileged and may be treated as a source of authentic knowledge, rather than being examined critically (Avis 1995).

Clearly, much about the field of adult education and the current context in which it operates tends to repudiate emancipatory learning as a goal. Those adult educators who make a conscious choice to foster emanciptatory learning may face barriers as they engage in practices designed to bring it about (Durie 1996).

Do Practices Designed to Foster Emancipatory Learning Have the Desired Result?

Adult educators draw from critical theory, feminist pedagogy, and post-structuralist theories, among others, to develop pedagogical practices that foster emancipatory learning. The major assumptions underlying these practices are empowerment, teacher as learner, joint knowledge construction, critical reflection, student voice, and dialogue (Durie 1996; Ellsworth 1989; Hart 1990; Tisdell 1998). Although adult educators may use practices based on these theories, they do not always result in emancipatory learning. This section examines some of the issues related to emancipatory learning.

Is Emancipatory Pedagogy Empowering?

Critical examinations of practices underlying emancipatory learning have revealed that they do not always have the desired effect and that relationships between and among instructors and students are not straightforward. Elsworth (1989) was one of the first to examine critically the assumptions underlying critical pedagogy based on her experience using critical pedagogy in an education course. She found that the classroom is a site for complex interactions of power in which relationships of privilege and oppression around race, gender, and class are formed in unpredictable ways and that these relationships cannot be understood through universal theories about structures of power and oppression.

In a similar vein, based on an experience in an adult education classroom, Durie (1996) found that "irrespective of where one stands within the relations of privilege and oppression, it is not possible to know the multiple subjective experiences of others, within and between the borders of race, class and gender as they intersect across and within the borders of age, disability and sexual preference" (p. 140). According to Durie, the complexities in these relationships must be acknowledged, including the fact that emancipatory practices may not eliminate them. In her classroom, for example, real conflicts arose around the practice of student voice, including who spoke, who did not speak, what was said and not said, who did not feel heard, and so forth. Durie also found that some students did not accept her efforts to use emancipatory pedagogy, either because they had traditional expectations of her as the instructor (e.g., that she should be the source of all knowledge) or because they perceived her as trying to impose her view of truth on them.

Tisdell (1998) is another adult educator who has examined emancipatory learning in the adult education setting. Like Durie, she used feminist poststructuralist theories as the basis for her analysis. According to Tisdell (1998), some adult educators are influenced by these theories and "have begun to address some of [the] issues around positionality, authority, voice, and the construction of knowledge" but many differences still exist between adult education and poststructural feminist approaches (p. 153). For example, the lit-

erature in adult education has virtually ignored dealing with the positionality of the instructor. Positionality refers to how individuals are "situated and positioned within social structures where they are multiply and simultaneously privileged and oppressed" (ibid., p. 150). Also, in many adult education settings, no differentiation is made between the many experiences that the learners bring to the classroom, despite the fact that some learners "have been listened to more, validated more, and have had [their] contributions privileged more than others have, in both overt and covert ways" (p. 154).

Other adult educators (e.g., Hart 1990) have also discussed the importance of acknowledging and addressing learner and instructor world view (positionality) in the classroom. The experiences learners and instructors bring to the classroom have an impact on everything that happens including joint knowledge construction, voice, and dialogue.

Empowerment or Emancipation?

Another issue related to emancipatory learning has to do with the term *empowerment*, a word frequently heard in conjunction with adult education. It is not unusual to hear adult educators speak of empowering learners by helping them develop self-awareness and social and political understanding (Foley 1998). Although adult education classrooms may focus on empowering learners, these actions do not necessarily lead to emancipatory learning because they only teach adults how to operate successfully within existing power structures (Foley 1998; Inglis 1997). Learning that is emancipatory includes not only understanding existing power structures but also how to resist and challenge these structures and their underlying ideologies (Inglis 1997). Transformative learning, for example, with its emphasis upon critical reflection and perspective transformation, is not necessarily emancipatory in nature if that transformation does not lead to some kind of action. Although empowerment can take place as a part of emancipatory learning, it does so within the context of social and political transformation (ibid.).

Is Emancipatory Learning Individual or Collective?

Because of its emphasis on social change, it has been proposed that emancipatory learning is a collective activity (Foley 1998; Inglis 1997). Through a process of critical reflection and analysis, individuals act collectively to address inequalities and injustices (Foley 1998). Does this mean that emancipatory learning can never take place as an individual activity? Evidence exists that individuals can and do engage in emancipatory learning. The women in Loughlin's (1994) study, for example, came to understand existing inequities and injustices within society through emancipatory learning, and, as a result, engaged in social action to make changes.

Conclusion

Many issues surround emancipatory learning. It has not been embraced by adult education as a major purpose, despite the fact that it may be a type of learning that is unique to adulthood. One reason for this may lie in how the field's knowledge base has developed. Until recently, research in adult learning has been dominated by the individual perspective (Caffarella and Merriam 1999). This perspective views learning as an internal activity that can be guided by a set of principles that can assist all learners, regardless of their background. Only within the past decade has another perspective reemerged. This one views learning as contextual and takes into account both "the interactive nature of learning and the structural aspects of learning grounded in a sociological framework" (ibid., p. 2). Many of the adult educators aligned with emancipatory learning are identified with this second perspective. Although both perspectives are important, more work needs to be done to link the two (ibid.). Perhaps when that occurs, emancipatory learning will be better understood and accepted within the field of adult education.

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